DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 360 626 CS 213 890

AUTHOR Strasma, Kip
TITLE Students' Compulsion To Screen: Research on Kenneth Burke's Terministic Screens.
PUB DATE Mar 93
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (44th, San Diego, CA, March 31-April 3, 1993).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Freshmen; Freewriting; Freshman Composition; Higher Education; Models; *Writing (Composition); Writing Processes; Writing Research
IDENTIFIERS *Burke (Kenneth); Selection Theory; *Terministic Screens

ABSTRACT

Kenneth Burke suggests that language operates from ultimate motives centered around "god-terms" through terministic screens. God-terms represent the strongest terministic screens in any culture: they screen attention to selected realities while screening or deflecting away others. A model of composition can be constructed from these theoretical principles. A person preparing to write has a number of terms from which to choose, a few of which may be god-terms that direct attention over and above the observations possible through the remaining terms. The writer follows through with the initial observations by selecting similar terms for the available terminology. A study included a freewriting construct completed by 150 freshmen that included three different writing prompts, each containing a quote about freedom, an almost universal god-term among Americans. Competing god-terms in the prompts were communism, flag-burner, and environmentalism. A random sample of 100 essays were analyzed. Results indicated that terministic screens were observed: students selected their own god-terms and supported them as their own position. Pedagogical applications of the model and the study include: (1) provide multicultural viewpoints in prompts; (2) encourage students to revise specifically for their own terministic compulsion; (3) teach critical reading strategies to discover god-terms; and (4) use collaborative exercises in which students assume different terminologies. (The three writing prompts, a figure representing a composition model and graphs are attached.) (RS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

Students' Compulsion to Screen: Research on Kenneth Burke's Terministic Screens

Kip Strasma
Illinois Central College

ED 360 626

CS213890

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Kip Strasma

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Students' Compulsion to Screen: Research on Kenneth Burke's Terministic Screens

Kip Strasma

Illinois Central College

By terministic screens, Kenneth Burke means the *ends* of our observations: that of which we are not aware, or that which is beyond the edges of a page. For example, the third page of your handout (Appendices I–III [each member of the audience received only one of the three possible "Assignments"]) represents a terministic screen in action. The sheet of paper contains observations about some issue or reality – but only that *one*; the rest has been deflected away because it is not represented to you at this particular point and time. Thus, the terms direct attention while the page assures that you will follow through only in *that* direction.

The "Assignment" illustrates one of the theoretical principles of Burke's writings, namely, that individual terms "screen" (much like movie and window screens) attention toward some realities rather than others–an *obvious* principle, but often unnoticed because it *is* so obvious. Burke's principle implies, at a more abstract level, that all communication occurs via various screens (personal, social, cultural, and historical); they are our orientations to the world, our world views, our perspectives. And like the sheet of paper marked "Assignment," we do not always see their edges or limits. Why is this observation to our understanding of writing now and in the future? Simply, as teachers of writing, writes Michael Pemberton in a recent article published in *College Composition and Communication*,

> we must know as much as possible about *how* people write; in order to know *how* people write, we must observe them writing under a variety of conditions and *describe* what we observe them doing. Unless we are willing to maintain that all writers approach writing tasks idiosyncratically, we must believe that there are certain commonalties among writers, and if there *are* commonalties, we should be able to *represent* or *model* them in some way. (41)

What writers have in common is the way that they screen and are screened by the specific terminology, as writing is the process of composing with,

CS213890

through, and upon terministic screens. Writers' ways can be described locally and globally: the "Assignment" is local, whereas the principle of terministic screens is global, as illustrated in Michael Pemberton's figure (Appendix IV). On the one side is the illustration or "Assignment." The other side is the theory that explains the "Assignment" as an illustration. Both meet in the middle as a model, somewhere between the "range from immediate, localized observations to global, highly abstracted systems of belief, with many possible gradations in between"(43).

I introduce my presentation with local and global perspectives about the historical writings of Kenneth Burke because Mr. Pemberton's research offers and excellent way to put everything into perspective. More to the point, the work of Kenneth Burke as a whole is usually thought to exist at the levels of (to use Mr. Pemberton's terms) of "paradigm" and "theory." As Cynthia Miecznikowski Sheard reveals in her *College English* essay on the research of Kenneth Burke,

> Although his work is eclectic and wide-ranging, if at times idiosyncratic, it is centered on a handful of themes fundamental to his analysis of the relations between language and culture or . . . humanity: that thought is action and that, therefore, its expression in language is a form of action, too, which is "symbolic" and always motivated by desire (or "interest" – conscious or unconscious . . . . (294)

Sheard goes on to mention two other "major" themes, namely, the historical grounding of "symbolic action" and the humanistic use of "symbolic action" for "coping with life experience" (294). Through "Dramatism" and "Symbolic Action," Burke explains the most general functions and elements of language; current parallels of Burke's work include cognitive, social, socio-cognitive, feminist, and expressivist rhetorics. It is from these "paradigms" and "theories" that our "models," pedagogy, and "data" are generated and observed. Similarly, it is from Burke's research on "Dramatism" and "Symbolic Action" that I have attempted to briefly sketch a model and pedagogy for the teaching of writing that has both theoretical and empirical value.

To begin, a Burkean theory of language explains how and why certain choices are made during the writing process. Burke's approach provides a

unique way of explaining these choices–at least different from the rhetorics already mentioned, because, for Burke, language operates from ultimate motives centered around "god-terms" through terministic screens (Sheard 300). These screens result in more or less coherent terminologies from which observations about the world are made. In his own words, Burke writes,

> We *must* use terministic screens, since we can't say anything without the use of terms; whatever terms we use, they necessarily constitute a corresponding kind of screen; and any such screen necessarily directs the attention to one field rather than another. Within that field there can be different screens, each with its ways of directing the attention and shaping the range of observations implicit in the given terminology. . . . [For example,] the Freudian terminology is highly serviceable in calling attention to ideas that are not given full conscious recognition because they are *repressed. (Language As Symbolic Action* 50-51)

In his example, the god-terms would be the organizing terms, such as "repressed," "ego," or "oral fixation," because they "point to," summarize, or entitle other information; thus, they reflect and refract attention according to their meaning and associative power. For Burke, it is next to impossible to observe objective or ontological reality because meaning is always–already organized for us through the terminology that necessarily screens our attention in selective ways. Before moving on to constructing a composing model and its empirical evidence, I would like to take a few more moments to elaborate upon the implications of Burke's observations.

According to Burke, terministic screens are the ways that attention is directed. They work together with individual terms in predictable ways:

> When I speak of "terministic screens," I have particularly in mind some photographs I once saw. They were *different* photographs of the *same* objects, the difference being in that they were made with different color filters. Here, something so "factual" as a photograph revealed notable distinctions in texture, and even in form, depending upon which filter was used for the documentary description of the even being recorded. *(Language as Symbolic Action* 45)

He also says of terministic screens:

> Not only does the nature of our terms affect the nature of our observations, in the sense that the terms direct at-tension to one field rather than to another. Also, many of the "observations" are but implications of the particular terminology in terms of which the observations are made. In brief, much that we take as observations about "reality" may be but the spinning out of possibilities implicit in [the] particular choice of terms. *(Language as Symbolic Action* 46)

Different terms that record a similar reality foster differing perceptions and interpretations of that reality. Interestingly, Burke associates perception and interpretation with terministic screens, almost as if terms screened and condensed thoughts that, without reflection, seem as if they are the *only* reality (which explains how it is possible to represent a terministic screen as a sheet or paper or "Assignment").They are able to do so because no term or terministic screen is isolated but part of a larger, more coherent group of terms.

To put it another way, terministic screens work together as a terminology, or "cycle of terms that imply one another" *(Language as Symbolic Action* 50). Burke explains:

> The dramatistic view of language, in terms of "symbolic action," is exercised about the necessarily *suasive* nature of even the most unemotional scientific nomenclatures. And we shall proceed along those lines; thus: Even if a given terminology is a *reflection* of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a *selection* of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a *deflection* of reality. *(Language as Symbolic Action* 45)

Designated terms belonging to their respective terminology cycle attention further beyond the original terms themselves to terms that reflect, select, and deflect. An example I find helpful is the difference between "Gulf War" and "Desert Storm." Each term directs attention to parallel terms that reflect the same reality, a bloody battle brought on by an imperialistic nation and the maneuvering of the military climate to bring life to a dead land. As a result,

each set of terms, "Gulf War" and "Desert Storm," focuses attention on certain realities at the expense of others. In fact, it is impossible to describe the reality without terms, terminology that belong to an *already-interested* terminology. Terms and terminologies are able to do this because of what Burke calls terministic compulsion.

As a result of terministic screens and terminologies, writers follow Burke's principle of perfection or the "entelechial" principle: *"That you may proceed to track down the kinds of observation implicit in the terminology you have chosen, whether your choice of terms was deliberate or spontaneous" (Language as Symbolic Action* 47). Burke calls our attention to this principle because

> A given terminology contains various implications, and there is a corresponding "perfectionist" tendency for [people] to attempt carrying out those implications. . . . There is a kind of "terministic compulsion" to carry out the implications of one's terminology, quite as, if an astronomer discovered by his [or her] observations and computations that a certain wandering body was likely to hit the earth and destroy us, he [or she] would nonetheless feel compelled to *argue for the correctness of his* [or her] *computations,* [and] draw out the implications of their terminologies . . . . *(Language as Symbolic Action* 19)

Such compulsion occurs because language itself organizes our experience of reality. We begin with one set of terms and follow them to their "natural" conclusion because of our urge to "make sense of things." The movement is not always linear and uninterrupted, as other terms may compete for attention, but the drive is, nevertheless, primary and prominent. Why? Burke believes that terminology follows from our motives to seek identification or unity out of diversity–to seek out god-terms.

According to Cynthia Sheard,

> God-terms are thus, for Burke, "names for the ultimates of motivation" *(Permanence and Change* 76). Science, Nature (in more contemporary terms, "the Environment"), Democracy, Communism, Capitalism, Money, Power, Peace, Truth, Justice–are all god-terms by Burke's definition, as are Allah, Brahma,

> Budda, Christ, and, of course, God. When invoked by individual members of a culture (or society), they draw those individuals, whatever their differences, into a cohesive group–a community. (Sheard 299)

I believe that god-terms represent the strongest terministic screens in any culture or society. Therefore, they screen attention to selected realities while screening or deflecting away others. This makes sense intuitively and theoretically; that is, Burke's "paradigm" seems to make sense in that action results from the use of specific symbols, namely, god-terms. But what kind of composing model unravels from all of this? Do god-terms really exist? And how do they work?

To the first question, a composing model can be constructed from the theoretical principles outlined above. A person preparing to write has a number of terms from which to choose during a specific composing session (usually from an "Assignment"). Of these terms, a few may be god-terms that direct attention over and above the observations possible *through the remaining terms*. In a sense, the writer carries out the implications of the god-terms present on the page and in his or her memory (collected through previous reading, writing, speaking, etc. with texts and/or members of his or her respective culture). Because of the desire to identify and because of terministic compulsion, the writer follows through with the initial observations by selecting similar terms from his or her available terminology, often without reflection or awareness that there may be other realities.

I've seen this occur again and again in the writing of my students–and of myself. For one reason or another, writing tends to affirm the suggested observations of one particular text, or, more common, a person's own terminologies. That is, I've seen my students affirm certain god-terms through agreement (because their terminologies identify with the god-terms) or disaffirm god-terms through disagreement (because their terminologies are not similar to the observations screened to them via the god-terms). Let me put this into perspective by saying that I ask my students to write on a wide range of social issues, from "AIDS" to "Homosexuality in the Armed Forces." With these issues, students often have views that reflect those of their own personal or "home" culture. When I introduce assignments on these issues, there is a tendency do less thinking than reacting to or *through* terministic screens. As

my aim is to have students carefully review many perspectives, I obviously want them to get beyond their own initial reactions and observations (or screens).

Accordingly, I would like to share an empirical study that I conducted with about 150 of my first-year writing students. The study included a freewriting or "stimulated recall" construct that included three different prompts; you have one of the three on the third page of your handout. The others are represented on the overhead (Appendix V). Consistent throughout all three "Assignments" is the quotation about freedom, containing a series of almost universal god-term among Americans. Along with the quotations are three different authors representing three different positions through one or more competing god-terms (the underlined portions). In my study, each of the 150 student wrote in response to only one of the "Assignments" for about 20 minutes; they were to explain whether and why they agreed or disagreed with the prompt. These "Assignments" presented students, I believe, with the kind of ambiguity of which Burke speaks and the kind of uncertainty typical of many writing contexts for first-years students. In other words, students are asked to state their opinions (in a new, non-personal context) and support them with their own observations.

The "Assignments" presented students with competing god-terms, "Communism," "Flag-Burner," "Environmentalism," and the quotation on freedom from which students were asked to identify. In my study, students' responses were independently read by three others and codified according to rank-order scale of agreement and/or disagreement with the observations made in the "Assignments;" in Burke's terms, they were read for students' compulsion to screen in the direction suggested by the original god-terms and corresponding screen. A random sample of 100 essays were given a score of one through five; a one equaled strong agreement, two equaled agreement with some conditions, three equaled an ambivalent response, while the scores of four and five equaled the opposite of one and two. For our purposes here, I have summarized the scores according to only two categories, agreement and disagreement.

The results seem to confirm that terministic screens can be observed (Appendix VI). Seventy percent of the students who wrote in response to the third "Assignment" ("Environmentalism" terministic screen) continued the

observations suggested by the environmentalist and agreed with her observations. A typical response went something like this:

> The quotation above, I believe, is a very interesting idea. The world would be a better place if everyone felt the way that Sara Johnson felt. I feel that sometimes people take advantage of freedom given to us and feel no obligation in giving of themselves in return.

On the other hand, only 52% of the students who wrote in response to the first "Assignment" ("Communism" terministic screen) continued the observations suggested by the Communist supporter and agreed with his observations. A typical response went something like this:

> In the context of reforms in the Soviet Union, this statement could be seen as dangerous. From what I understand, the government is based on ideas of social equality . . . . If reform is what is needed in the Soviet Union, then the statement above would be a throw-back to the strict government control.

Finally, and most significantly, almost 91% of students who wrote in response to the second "Assignment" ("Nationalism" terministic screen) continued the observations suggested by the "flag-burner" and agreed with his observations. A typical response went something like this:

> I totally agree with this statement to the fact that Flag burning is demeaning to our country. We all can't do what we want all the time; it is just not possible or legal. A person cannot kill someone else just because he wants to. A person can't steal a car just because he wants to. That is not the American freedom we want . . . .

Comments such as these bring into view some new questions and I would like to end with them and what they mean for the teaching of writing in the next decade.

Are all god-terms equal? Obviously, the answer is no. Accordingly to my descriptive study, some terms force identification with greater strength than others. This makes sense in terms of the model offered above, namely, that when offered a range of competing terms, students will usually select those terms with which they identify; they will select their own god-terms and support them as their own position. By no means, however, are god-terms

idiosyncratic. Although students may have their own personal experience of culture and history, that experience may be shared by others of that culture and history. The challenge is to find those shared god-terms and assist students in the process of "seeing" *beyond* them.

Next, there is the question of why some students did not agree or disagree. I admit that this is a difficult question because the model I proposed did not account for such a possibility; but I think the model can account for such divergent data. Failure of terms to screen attention in any single direction means, perhaps, that the terms no longer serve as god-terms, and this may have been the case with the "Communist Party Official Assignment," given the political and historical climate of my study. Finally, there is the question of how accurate the construct was in measuring the viability of the model. There is no way to tell for sure; however, additional studies with different terms, such as those mentioned above by Sheard, and with different constructs, such as brainstorming, prewriting, or revising, could help us in confirming the model and theory upon which it is based.

Having said all of this, my findings and model do suggest some pedagogical applications, ways for us to work with the many individual students in our classrooms, and I will conclude with them:

1) provide the opportunity for opposing viewpoints in assignment prompts
2) support multi-cultural and multi-perspective textbooks or supply "other" voices from other forums
3) encourage students to re-read and revise specifically for their own terministic compulsion
4) be aware of the god-terms we use when writing assignments and when responding to student texts
5) teach critical reading strategies for the purpose of discovering god-terms and/or terministic screens in published texts
6) utilize collaborative exercises (role-playing) in which students assume different terminologies (roles).

Works Cited

Burke, Kenneth. *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method.* Berkeley: U of CA P, 1966.

- - -. *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose.* 2nd ed. Los Altos, CA: Hermes P, 1954.

- - - . *A Rhetoric of Motives.* 2n. ed. Berkeley: U of CA P, 1962.

Pemberton, Michael. "Modeling Theory and Composing Process Models." *CCC* 44.1 (Feb 1993): 40-58.

Sheard, Cynthia Miechznikowski. "Kairos and Kenneth Burke." *CE* 55.3 (Mar 1993): 291-310.

ASSIGNMENT

Yuri Schlovsky, Communist Party official, while arguing for caution in adopting governmental changes in the Soviet Union, said: "Freedom is not the right to do whatever we want. It is the privilege of doing what we ought. It is not public license; it is the binding of ourselves for the good of all."

Do you generally agree or disagree with this quotation? In the space below, write a response in which you explain your position. Of course, there is no "right" or "wrong" position on this issue.

ASSIGNMENT

Jules Corbett, Former State Commander of the American Legion, while arguing for a constitutional amendment against flag-burning, said: "Freedom is not the right to do whatever we want. It is the privilege of doing what we ought. It is not public license; it is the binding of ourselves for the good of all."

Do you generally agree or disagree with this quotation? In the space below, write a response in which you explain your position. Of course, there is no "right" or "wrong" position on this issue.

ASSIGNMENT

Sarah E. Johnson, Environmental activist, attempting to urge citizen participation in the annual Earth Day celebration, said: "Freedom is not the right to do whatever we want. It is the privilege of doing what we ought. It is not public license; it is the binding of ourselves for the good of all."

Do you generally agree or disagree with this quotation? In the space below, write a response in which you explain your position. Of course, there is no "right" or "wrong" position on this issue.

FIGURE 1

DATA - - - MODELS - - - THEORIES - - - PARADIGMS

"Modeling Theory and Composing Process Models"
– Michael A. Pemberton

FIGURE 2

ASSIGNMENT A

Yuri Schlovsky, Communist Party official, while arguing for caution in adopting governmental changes in the Soviet Union, said: **"Freedom is not the right to do whatever we want. It is the privilege of doing what we ought. It is not public license; it is the binding of ourselves for the good of all."**

Do you generally agree or disagree with this quotation? In the space below, write a response in which you explain your position. Of course, there is no "right" or "wrong" position on this issue.

ASSIGNMENT B

Jules Corbett, Former State Commander of the American Legion, while arguing for a constitutional amendment against flag-burning, said: **"Freedom is not the right to do whatever we want. It is the privilege of doing what we ought. It is not public license; it is the binding of ourselves for the good of all."**

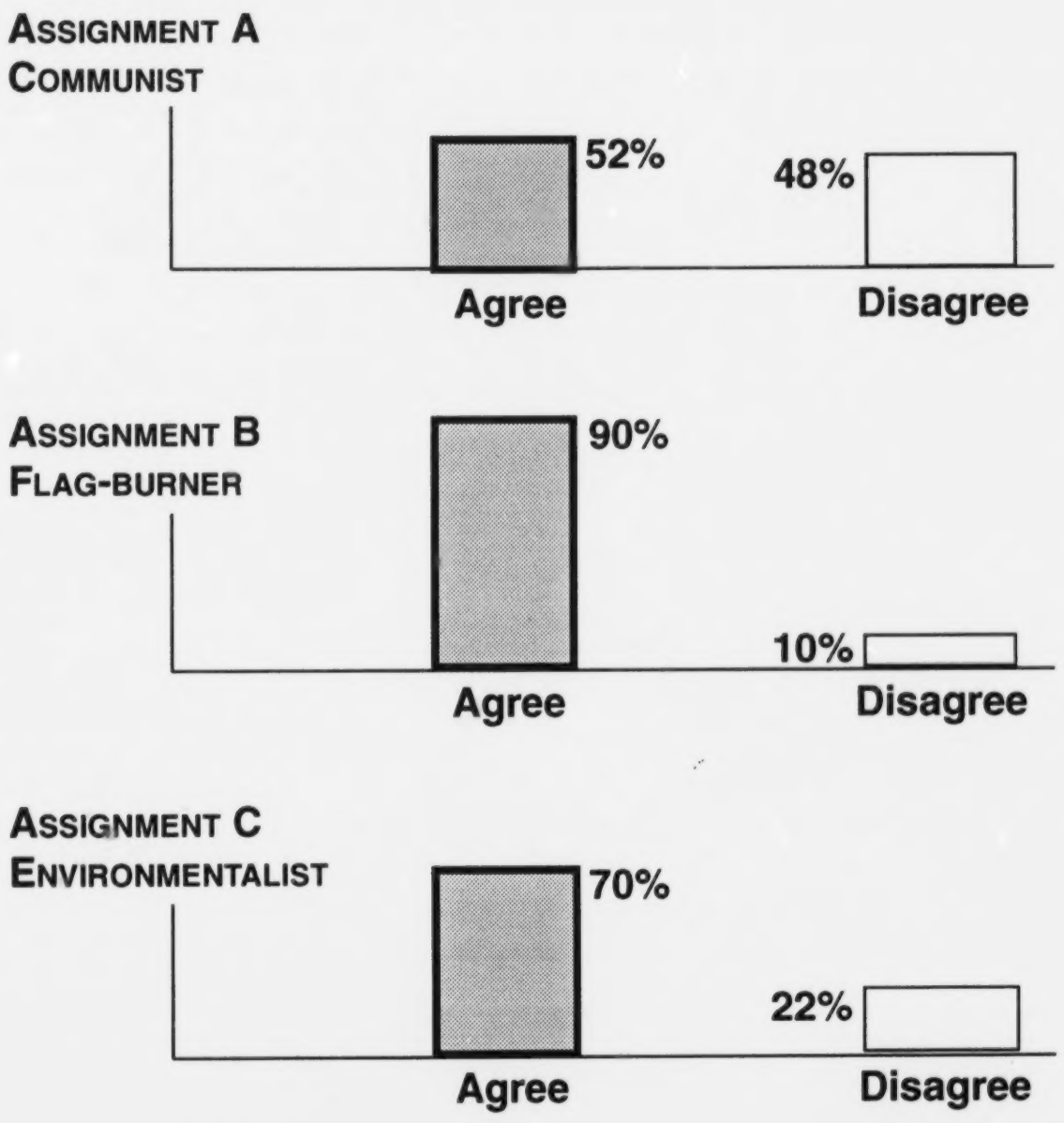
Do you generally agree or disagree with this quotation? In the space below, write a response in which you explain your position. Of course, there is no "right" or "wrong" position on this issue.

ASSIGNMENT C

Sarah E. Johnson, Environmental activist, attempting to urge citizen participation in the annual Earth Day celebration, said: **"Freedom is not the right to do whatever we want. It is the privilege of doing what we ought. It is not public license; it is the binding of ourselves for the good of all."**

Do you generally agree or disagree with this quotation? In the space below, write a response in which you explain your position. Of course, there is no "right" or "wrong" position on this issue.

FIGURE 3


ASSIGNMENT A
COMMUNIST
52%
48%
Agree
Disagree
ASSIGNMENT B
FLAG-BURNER
90%
10%
Agree
Disagree
ASSIGNMENT C
ENVIRONMENTALIST
70%
22%
Agree
Disagree